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ABSTRACT

This document describes the concepts and policies guiding the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) in programming for services in the school to work transition. Underlying assumptions address the complexity of post-school services, the focus on all students with disabilities, and the goal of employment as an important outcome of education. A conceptual framework of transition views three bridges from school to work: transition without special services, transition with time-limited services (such as vocational rehabilitation and postsecondary vocational education), and ongoing services that allow disabled persons to take advantage of work opportunities. Additional model components center on the high school and employment foundations. OSERS initiatives related to each component are noted along with several broader research and evaluation issues, such as the need for careful descriptions of current transition experiences. (CL)

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OSERS PROGRAMMING FOR THE TRANSITION OF YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES: BRIDGES FROM SCHOOL TO WORKING LIFE

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Youth with disabilities face an uncertain future when they leave the nation's public schools. Qualification for employment is an implied promise of American education, but between 50 and 80 percent of working age adults who report a disability are jobless (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1983; U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1982). Without employment, many individuals turn to community services only to find long waiting lists. Those adults with disabilities who do gain entry into publicly-supported day and vocational services often experience low wages, slow movement toward employment, and segregation from their non-disabled peers (U. S. Department of Labor, 1979).

Approximately one school generation after guaranteeing the right to a free appropriate public education for all children with handicaps, it is appropriate that the federal government address the transition of persons with disabilities from school to working life. The cost of disability joblessness and dependence is high and rising. Approximately eight percent of the gross national product is spent each year in disability programs, with most of this amount going to programs that support dependence (White House Working Group on Disability Policy, 1983). The public's investment in special education can do much to prevent this dependence and lead to full community participation, if systematic attention is now given to the transition of youth with disabilities from school to work and adult life.

The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) has responded to this need by establishing a national priority on improving the transition from school to working life for all individuals with disabilities. This paper describes the concepts and policies that guide OSERS in analyzing transition issues and programming for transition improvements.

Transition Defined

Transitions are an important part of normal life. As roles, locations, or relationships change, all of us must adapt, and we do so with more or less disruption or stress. The transition from school to working life calls for a range of choices about career options, living arrangements, social life, and economic goals that often have life-long consequences. For individuals with disabilities, this transition is often made

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even more difficult by limitations that can be imposed by others' perceptions of disability and by the complex array of services that are intended to assist adult adjustment.

The transition from school to working life is an outcome-oriented process encompassing a broad array of services and experiences that lead to employment. Transition is a period that includes high school, the point of graduation, additional post-secondary education or adult services, and the initial years in employment. Transition is a bridge between the security and structure offered by the school and the opportunities and risks of adult life. Any bridge requires both a solid span and a secure foundation at either end. The transition from school to work and adult life requires sound preparation in the secondary school, adequate support at the point of school leaving, and secure opportunities and services, if needed, in adult situations.

Since the services and experiences that lead to employment vary widely across individuals and comunities, the traditional view of transition as a special linking service between school and adult opportunities is insufficient. The present definition emphasizes the shared responsibility of all involved parties for transition success, and extends beyond traditional notions of service coordination to address the quality and appropriateness of each service area.

Underlying Assumptions

Three assumptions underly OSERS programming for transition. Stating these at the outset should clarify basic policy positions.

Complexity of Post School Services

Public and private schools provide a range of services for students with disabilities in a relatively organized fashion. While the upper and lower ages for these services vary from State to State, the comprehensive nature of the services organized and, in many cases, funded by the schools is relatively consistent. Upon leaving the schools, however, individuals enter into a world where there is competetion for scarce employment opportunities, an array of service providers and funding agencies, and differing eligibility requirements. The OSERS program assumes that students in transition from school are leaving a somewhat organized provider system and entering a more complex and confusing world, not fully understood by most service professionals, much less parents or consumers. This complexity is necessary, if adult services are to offer oportunities for normal adult living and working to all individuals with disabilities. Effective transition requires that relevant community opportunities and service combinations be developed to fit individual circumstances and

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needs.

Focus on All Students with Disabilities

The second assumption is that OSERS programming for transition should address all citizens with disabilities who leave school for adult services and opportunities. An estimated 250,000 to 300,000 students leave special education each year; no doubt many others graduate from the regular curriculum, but because of a disability, require specialized services to obtain employment. It might be possible to differentiate among the many types and levels of disability and thereby emphasize the commitment to inculde all school leavers with disabilities. We have found it more useful, however, to focus on the service needs of these individuals, identifying the kinds of services that will assist the transition of all persons with disabilities from school to working life.

The Goal of Employment

The final assumption is that sustained employment represents an important outcome of education and transition for all Americans. The goal of OSERS programming for transition is that individuals leaving the school system obtain jobs, either immediately after school or after a period of post-secondary education or vocational services. Employment is a critical aspect of the lives of most adults in our society, whether their work involves highly paid career specializations, entry level jobs, or working in situations where ongoing support services are provided. Paid employment offers opportunities to expand social contacts, contribute to society, demonstrate creativity, and establish an adult identity. The income generated by work creates purchasing power in the community, makes community integration easier, expands the range of available choices, enhances independence, and creates personal status. Of course, this concern with employment does not indicate a lack of interest in other aspects of adult living. Success in social, personal, leisure, and other adult roles enhance opportunities both to obtain employment and to enjoy its benefits.

Equality in employment opportunity has been a consistent goal for achieving participation and integration in the mainstream of American society. Whenever people have held lower aspirations for the work potential of a particular group of citizens, those assumptions have been proven wrong. There has been a long history when it was assumed that women could not enter sustained employment roles in our society. Similarly, there has been the assumption that people who were without sight or hearing or who were in wheel chairs were not capable of employment roles in our society. In each case assumptions of low work potential have been discounted as soon as equal opportunities or proper training became avaliable. The OSERS

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transition program is prepared with the assumption that the goal of sustained employment should not be disregarded because of the presence, nature, or severity of a disability. Of course, traditional unsupported job roles, in which individuals are expected to function without benefit of social services, may be difficult for many individuals to sustain. For these persons, alternative supported employment opportunities can be developed that combine work opportunities and ongoing support services.

The focus on employment as a central outcome of effective transition provides an objective measure of transition success. The quality of employment that results for individuals can be defined and assessed in the same way that it is difined for others, using standard measures of labor economics. One national professional and advocacy organization put it this way:

> (T)he quality of employment and related day and vocational services for individuals with...disabilities should be judged by the same criteria used to evaluate the employment of others in our society: income level and the resulting opportunities created by that income; quality of working life, including integration of the work place, safety, and access to challenging work; and security benefits, including job mobility, advancement opportunities, and protection from lifestyle disruptions due to illness or accident (TASH, 1983).

A related index of successful transition is the community integration enjoyed by persons with disabilities leaving school. Regular access to interactions with individuals without identified handicaps and regular use of normal community resources represent important results of the services and opportunities available to each person with a disability. Employment success can contribute to community integration in two ways. First, if the work place itself is integrated, it affords the opportunity for social contacts with coworkers, customers, or supervisors during work breaks and, in some jobs, throughout the day. Second, the income generated by work provides the purchasing power that is necessary for integration into much of a community's commercial, social, and recreational life.

The OSERS View of Transition

A conceptual framework that describes transition opportunities is needed if public efforts to help individuals with disabilities move from school to working life are to be well planned, coordinated across agencies, and evaluated

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responsibly. Programming for transition involves using different kinds and amounts of support with different individuals, so that each has the opportunity to work and enjoy the lifestyle benefits of working. There is a nearly infinite set of services and experiences that could lead successfully from school to work for some individuals. Naturally, distinctions must be made among these, in order to reflect important differences in policy, authority, and practice among the many public agencies that can be involved in transition services.

For practical purposes, transition services can be grouped into three classes that reflect the nature of public services used to provide support as the passage is completed. The first involves movement from school either without services or with only those that are available to the population at large; the second involves use of time-limited services that are designed to lead to independent employment at the termination of service; and the third involves use of ongoing services for those disabled individuals who do not move to unsupported work roles. Each of these three transition strategies, or bridges from school to work, is necessary if all individuals with disabilities are to move successfully to working roles. Together with the foundations provided by the secondary school and employment opportunities, these bridges form a five-part model of the transition process that underlies OSERS programming. The model is illustrated in Figure 1 and described briefly below.

The High School Foundation

Secondary special education, in concert with vocational education and other school-based services provides the foundation in skills, attitudes, personal relationships, and often, employer contacts that determines much of the success of later transition. Curriculum content in special education and vocational education affects whether or not students leave school with entry level job skills that are saleable in the local community. Organization and location of the high school program often determines the extent to which students with disabilities are experienced in interacting with non-disabled peers and co-workers, and whether or not potential employers have been able to observe their competent performance of community jobs. The instructional procedures used in high school can greatly affect whether curriculum goals are achieved only by the most capable students or by the full range of persons with disabilities. Transition success can also be affected by the support for personal decision-making that is provided in the schools through the school counselor, individual assessment, vocational rehabilitation personnel in the schools, and the IEP process. Whether the student goes to college, attends post-secondary education, utilizes rehabilitation services, or needs more extended support, the

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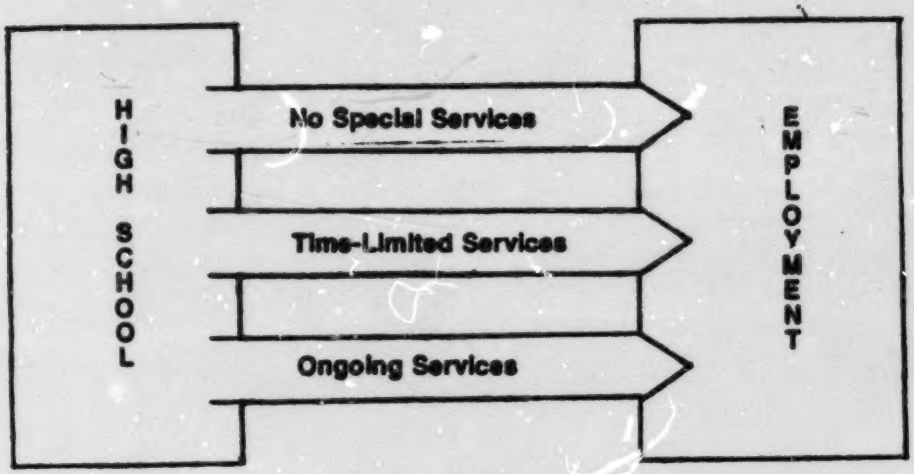
Figure 1

Major Components of the Transition Process



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initiatives of secondary school personnel can and do make a difference in the success of students facing the transition from school to working life.

Transition Without Special Services

The first bridge from school to employment is shared by many individuals with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. Individuals making the transition in this way rely on their own resources or those generally available to all citizens, locating and taking advantage of work opportunities without using special disability services. This is not to say special accomodations for the needs of persons with disabilities are not made, but in this pathway these accomodations are incorporated within generic services. For example, some individuals obtain employment at the end of high school programs using contacts gained through work experience programs. Others attend post-secondary education institutions and gain skills that lead to more advanced employment options. Still others locate their own employment through family contacts, neighborhood networks, or short-term volunteer jobs. The number of disabled individuals who make their own way from school to employment is unknown, although the size of this group probably varies with job availability, quality of schooling, and access to generic services.

Post-secondary education institutions are a particularly important segment of the generic services that comprise this pathway. Community colleges, vocational and techicnal schools, and four-year institutions of higher education play important roles in transition of youth without disabilities from school to work. That their potential contribution to those with disabilities is equally as significant has now been shown in many communities.

Transition with Time-Limited Services

The second bridge from school to working life consists of temporary services that lead to employment. After leaving school, individuals following this path use specialized, time-limited services like vocational rehabilitation, post-secondary vocational education, and other job training programs to gain entry into the labor market. The presence of a disability often qualifies an individual for these services or creates special support for participation. For example, many individuals find employment after recieving relatively brief serivces in rehabilitation facilities. Others recieve support to attend specific job training and then obtain employment at the close of the course. Access to such time limited services is generally restricted to individuals thought capable of making it on their own after services are completed.

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Vocational rehabilitation offers perhaps the best known time-limited services. Individuals with employment-related disabilities qualify for services if there is a reasonable expectation of employment at the close of services. Once accepted the program allows for quite flexible use of funds to provide whetever support is needed by the individual to enter or re-enter the workforce. While there are many cases of quite extended services to individual clients, vocational rehabilitation services are normally terminated after an individual obtains employment or other service objectives.

Transition with Ongoing Services

The third bridge from school to working life consists of ongoing services that allow individuals with disabilities to take advantage of work opportunities. Unlike the first two alternatives, this bridge represents a fundamental change in much current policy and proctice. At present, ongoing adult services are typically designed to be non-vocational, either providing lifelong custodial care or preparing consumers for later vocational services. The lack of significant movement from these programs to rehabilitation and employment, however, has meant that they actually serve as an alternative to work, functionally excluding participants from both work-related services and employment opportunities. Consistent with the assumptions defined earlier, the alternative proposed here is employment, with whatever ongoing support is necessary to maintain that employment. For example, an individual using this bridge from school to working life might leave school and obtain employment as part of a small team of disabled individuals in an electronics manufacturing plant, where the state agency responsible for ongoing services paid for a work supervisor in the company.

Making this pathway a viable transition alternative involves establishing local services and supportive policies that allow combinations of work opportunities and ongoing support. Such "supported employment" programs could occur in a variety of circumstances: in an industry like that mentioned above, where a small group of disabled workers received publicly supported supervision; in dispersed individual placements in a community, with publicly-funded support staff rotating among sites; in a mobile crew that works in community settings; or in a former day activity program that operates a business that is successful enough to offer full time employment opportunities to participants. In each case, individual participants should enjoy the full range of employment benefits mentioned above.

Establishing these services will involve assisting States, since no single federal agency is responsible for program assistance, evaluation, or funding. Different States rely on different agencies for management of ongoing services, with Mental Health, Mental Retardation, Public Welfare, and

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Vocational Rehabilitation agencies all having responsibility in some states. Programs are supported by a mixture of State appropriations and federal assistance through the Social Service Block Grant and Medicaid.

The Employment Foundation

Regardless of the quality of schooling and the availability and appropriateness of bridging services, successful transition ultimately requires employment opportunities. The probability that any individual will find suitable opportunities may be enhanced by family and neighborhood networks, individual presence and participation in community activities, and job search efforts. The overall percent of individuals with disabilities who find work may reflect quite different factors, including the overall status of the economy, the extent of job discrimination, and structural unemployment affecting youth, unskilled workers, and other groups. Consequently, programming for transition from school to working life cannot be addressed adequately without simultaneous attention to such labor issues as minimum wage levels, business incentives to offer employment, equal employment opportunity, and efforts to address structural unemployment problems.

Implications for OSERS Action

The five-part model of the transition process provides a way of organizing activities and plans to improve transition effectiveness. While each component of the model is important if all individuals with disabilities are to be included, the objectives and strategies are different in the five areas. This final section highlights some of the most significant aspects of the OSERS plan in each of the transition components.

To improve the foundation provided in the secondary school, OSERS will rely on a broadly based strategy of reseearch, development, demonstration, and replication that addresses all aspects of high school services. Particular interests include: renewed efforts to develop cooperative programs with vocational education and vocational rehabilitation to serve all students with disabilities; improvement of community-based job training and placement within the school's vocational preparation program; and development of service models for all students that allow regular and frequent contact with non-disabled peers.

One of the most important initiatives in assisting students make the transition without special services relates to post-secondary education. Community colleges and vocational technical schools offer an age-appropriate, integrated context in which youth and young adults with disabilities can expand personal, social, academic, and vocational skills. While emerging post-secondary programs will no doubt address the

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needs of all disability groups, OSERS is particularly concerned with stimulating research and program development for persons with learning disabilities and other mild educational handicaps.

Improvement of time-limited services has been the focus of most of the previous attention to transition, and much of the earlier work is still needed today. Cooperative relationships between special education, vocational rehabilitation, and vocational education can do much to facilitate vocational planning and ensure smooth changes in service responsibility. In addition, innovations in on-site job training and placement programs offer promise of greater effectiveness in time-limited services, and strategies will be developed to promote broader use of these approaches.

To improve employment with ongoing support OSERS has developed a new supported employment initiative which would assist interested States shift from day activity programs to work alternatives. The program would offer competitive grants to state agencies responsible for ongoing services, providing support for staff training, program development and demonstration, and other start-up activities. States would retain the responsibility for ongoing funding of services as the focus of programming shifts from day care or pre-vocational activities to supported employment.

Efforts to improve employment opportunities will involve cooperative initiatives with other agencies. Of particular concern to OSERS is development of a broader range of incentives for employers who offer jobs to individuals who may require special equipment, building modifications, longer training periods, or other investments.

In addition to iniatives directly related to the five components of the transition model, a few broader research and evaluation issues seem particularly important. First, too little is known about current transition experiences. We can only estimate the number of individuals who make their way into the workforce by each of the three bridges described earlier and the number who remain jobless despite current service efforts. Careful descriptions of the school population and follow-up studies of special education graduates could assist both schools and post-school services plan for transition, establish policies and prgrams, and evaluate results. A related issue concerns program evaluation strategies. An adequate evaluation of any transition effort should take the entire transition model into account, for changes in the number of people who use each of the three bridges may well be the most important result of improved transition. For example, little is gained if a time-limited or ongoing service provides efficient employment for individuals who otherwise would have obtained similar jobs on their own.

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OSERS programming for the transition from school to working life will offer federal leadership to state and local efforts to improve the lives of young adults with disabilities. To improve transition efforts while preserving the discretion of other levels of government, federal activities will focus on disseminating effective practices, providing assistance to states, and building the capacity of the professional community to deliver improved services. Because of the right to education legislation of the last decade, an unprecedented number of students with disabilities are nearing school leaving age. Special education for these individuals should lead to higher education, competetive work, or supported employment. It is time that, by working together, we help all citizens with disabilities achieve these outcomes, along with the personal status and community integration that they create.

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FOOTNOTE

This paper is a preliminary statement of policy that will guide the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services in programming for transition. The paper reflects the work of a special task force representing the Office of Special Education Programs, the Rehabilitation Services Administration, and the National Institute of Handicapped Research: Garry McDaniels, Douglas Fenderson, David Henderson, Ed Sontag, Joan Standlee, Thomas Bellamy, Michael Herrell, Wes Geigel, Martin Spickler, Carol Inman, Tom Nerney, Fred Sachs, Harvey Hirschi, David Rostetter, and Richard Melia. For his assistance in preparation of the paper, I want to express particular thanks to Thomas Bellamy. Comments on the paper are welcome and should be sent to Dr. Bellamy, 330 C Street SW, Room 3006, Washington, D.C. 20202.

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